

Alumni Books



PHOTO BY ELENA SEBERT

Why Would She Stay?

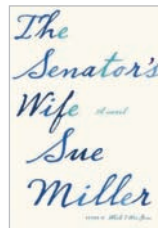
SUE MILLER'S NEW BEST SELLER EXPLORES A POLITICAL MARRIAGE

SUE MILLER'S eighth novel, *The Senator's Wife*, is timely, since it explores the curious dynamics of a political marriage. The book is about the intersecting lives of two women, Delia, the title character, long married to an unfaithful politician, and her younger neighbor, Meri, struggling with the burdens of a new baby. Its themes — love, family, fidelity, sacrifice, compromise, motherhood — are the ones that Miller returns to time and again.

Miller's first novel, *The Good Mother*, published in 1986, was a *New York Times* best seller for more than six months. Of the seven that have followed, three

have been Book-of-the-Month main selections: *Family Pictures*, *While I Was Gone* (also an Oprah's Book Club selection), and now *The Senator's Wife* (another *Times* best seller).

Miller (GRS'80) also wrote *Inventing the Abbotts*, a collection of short stories, and *The Story of My Father*, a memoir about her father's death from Alzheimer's disease. Among her honors are Guggenheim, Bunting, and MacDowell Colony fellowships, the Chicago Public Library's Carl Sandburg Literary Award, and nominations for the Orange Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award.



Bostonia talked with her this spring, as she was working on her next novel, due at Knopf in September, though, she says cheerfully, it's certain to be late.

When I read a new book of yours, I remember an early interview in which you said working in a nursery school taught you a lot about families. As you start a book, do you think about how you're going to shape the family or families?

I don't, but it just inevitably enters. Sometimes I think, this one is not about families at all, and then — it's just something I'm interested in, even if it's only background information about the characters. I feel as though their histories and their families are important.

Still, you don't feel compelled to give us every darn psychological bit of their background. I find that very wearying in novels.

I do, too.

Your families are not, generally speaking, terribly happy.

Of the characters in this new book, I think only Meri didn't grow up in a happy family. Few families are ideal, but most in some way or another manage to do the job.

Then there are the present-day marriages. The big action seems to be Meri's, so why is the title of the book Delia's?

It's partly because at least half the story is Delia's, although it's Meri whose action brings the book around. But it's also her fixation on Delia in a certain way that makes things happen the way they finally do.

In this election year, did it occur to you that the title might attract more readers?

It might — but the book would not have appeared in an election year if I hadn't turned it in late. So the timing, which is rather exquisite, was quite accidental.

Sex is important to both women, but it's not very important to the action: the most erotic scenes have to do with eating or set-

ting down happily to other solitary pleasures.

People think I focus a lot on sex, but it is in the background in this book. It is an element, and an important element, in the connection that both of these women have with their spouses, but I think it's not central to the book at all.

Early in the book, when Meri describes her decision to marry Tom, she says something like, "Of course there's the sex."

"The sex is what did it."

And sex is about all Delia has in her marriage, by the time we see it, anyway.

Yes, although there's a great store of affection. By keeping the marriage very minimal, she's able to be more in touch with that happier part of the memory of her marriage than the unhappy.

Is the message that it's easier to get along if you're not living in the same house?

Well, I think what Delia says is actually very nice, that you need some way out of a marriage while you're in it.

A lot of the book has to do with compromise and forgiveness. One of the happiest scenes in all of your books is the divorced couple in *Lost in the Forest* sitting at the dinner table with their children.

Yes, I think they're very friendly and warm, this couple who are no longer together. I've certainly known people who've made that possible, who really maintain those ties, although somehow the intimacy of marriage hasn't worked for them.

I like that you say of these characters, "I think," as if they're doing it on their own.

Yes, I try to imagine them as fully as I can, but I usually don't try to imagine the exact reasons for everything they're doing. And I'm not always sure that I could analyze it and tell you, "Well it's because this happened and this happened and this happened." There's a wonderful Flannery O'Connor quote in which she

gave a story to some southern relative of hers for a critique, and the relative said, "Well, that just goes to show you what some people will do." And that's what fiction is about, showing what people will do, and will do in spite of everything.

Is this novel also about the differences between men and women?

It's not so much that as the difficulty of anybody knowing anybody else. It's the impossibility of people even understanding themselves in some way. It seems to me that one of the issues is that neither Meri nor Delia really truly does understand herself. There's a point at which Meri is speculating on her marriage and says essentially that it is impossible, that if you were truly honest with the person you live with, you would never stop correcting everything and adjusting everything and arguing about everything.

It's reassuring somehow that Delia talks about enjoying her grown-up kids when Meri has such a hard time with her new baby.

I've heard from a number of readers how wonderful it was to see an account of someone who doesn't feel loving instantly. I don't think it's represented fictionally often, or in movies: there's this sense that women become mothers naturally and instantly. I think a lot of readers were glad to have a portrait of someone for whom that wasn't the case.

What else do you hear?

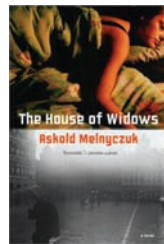
Well, a lot of people have trouble with Delia. I think it's dismaying to some people that in this contemporary world someone would take someone back who's been repeatedly unfaithful.

NATALIE JACOBSON McCRACKEN

FICTION AND POETRY

THE HOUSE OF WIDOWS
ASKOLD MELNYCZUK (GRS'78)
GRAYWOLF PRESS

"The most common grammatical error is the lie." Such a highly crafted, portentous opening,



appropriate only to the best books, is an apt start for this one, described by the publisher as "a novel of intrigue that is played across decades, continents, and generations." Well, yes, and that's a good line to sell books at the airport (this first edition is in paper), but Melnyczuk's third novel is much more.

The narrator, a petty bureaucrat in the U.S. Consul in Vienna, gave up a tenure-track professorship at Georgetown in the vain hope of reaching "the Olympus of Cultural Attaché." Sixteen years before, on his way to study at Oxford, he set out to discover why his father had committed suicide. In cities he had known little of, surrounded by languages he didn't understand, he met relatives he had not heard of and learned secrets his father may never have known. Although he concludes, "I didn't know my father any better than when I set out to find him," he felt "the past tightening into a fist, getting ready to strike," as it so often does in families and nations.

Melnyczuk's prose is as always elegant, his observations sharp and sometimes wry (of Boston's TD Banknorth Garden he muses, "How would Europeans feel about . . . the Sony Coliseum, the Mitsubishi Sistine Chapel, Toyota Big Ben?"). Intrigue and criminals abound in this highly literary novel, but the true villains are respected leaders in positions international and trifling (the mantra of at least the latter group: "One cannot be sentimental"). Take Winston Churchill, who at Yalta was too concerned about his cigars and cognac and protecting his own country to care about protecting Eastern Europe from the Soviets. NJM

JUDAS HORSE
APRIL SMITH (CAS'71)
ALFRED A. KNOPF

A Judas horse is one trained to lead a wild herd into captivity. Having been taught "about developing relationships and then betraying them" in FBI undercover school, agent Ana